

“This is Eternal Life”

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Acts 1:6-14

John 17:1-11

Why do people baptize babies? Most of us don't believe a baby will go to hell if it's not baptized. What kind of God would reject a child just because his or her parents neglected to perform some kind of ritual? Hopefully our God is not so petty or legalistic. So, is infant baptism old-fashioned and superstitious? Or just an excuse to throw a party? Why bother?

I actually did not baptize my own children when they were babies, even though I was a practicing Christian and a pastor at the time. In the Presbyterian Church, parents are not obligated to baptize their children. It is optional. We treat all of our children as part of our family of faith, whether they are baptized or not. Tom and I wanted our children to choose for themselves, and to have an experience they could remember. So when they were born we had a service of dedication for each of them in church and raised them as part of our church family, in the hope that they would choose for themselves later. And it turned out well. My middle child, Cassie, chose to be baptized first, at age 11. We baptized her by immersion in a claw-foot tub which we dragged into the sanctuary of my old church one Easter. We baptized two children that day and it was deeply moving for everyone. My youngest, Zoey, decided next at age 9, and a year later Talitha chose, at age 14. We baptized both of them in a lake at a Presbyterian camp. And both times it was an all-church outing, followed by swimming and a picnic for all. We have wonderful memories of these events.

But there are still good reasons to baptize babies. Even if we don't believe baptism is *necessary* for a child to belong to God, it *is* a visible sign of God's grace and forgiveness and welcome. Baptism does not create faith in a child. But it is a powerful symbol of belonging to God, and an event that marks a child as a member of the community of faith, and part of the body of Christ on earth. And we baptize babies with joy as a sign of God's grace and love, regardless of their ability to understand or respond. Because who can really fully understand the mysteries of God's grace? Baptism is a one-time event that a child can hold on to and be assured of God's love and acceptance. And it is a sign of our welcome, and our acceptance of responsibility to raise this child to know God and to follow in the way of Christ.

In the Presbyterian Church parents decide whether or not to baptize their babies. But we want to make sure they decide for good reasons, and not out of fear that their child will somehow miss out, or be ignored by God or excluded from heaven if they wait too long.

What you believe about heaven matters. Some people think of heaven as a place you go after you die, usually including all sorts of pleasures you enjoy in this world, or long for in this life. And if you're not baptized or not good enough, you're not allowed in.

But maybe heaven is not a place at all. Maybe heaven, or eternal life, is a quality of life, that we can also experience while we're still alive on this earth.

In her book Amazing Grace,* Kathleen Norris tells of a friend who visited her mother as she lay dying in the hospital. The friend tried to reassure the mother by saying, "In heaven, everyone we love is there." But her mother replied, "No, in heaven I will love everyone who's there." Heaven is not about being surrounded by people and things we love. It's about living in the love of God, here now, as well as in life beyond death.

Barbara read part of Jesus' prayer from the gospel of John this morning. He said, "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." It's not very complicated. Eternal life is to know God. And we can know God through Jesus Christ, because God was in Christ.

To know God is not about creeds and doctrines. When the Bible talks about knowing someone, it implies a relationship. If you know a person, you understand what's important to them, their values and their ways. And you are engaged with them. To know God means to understand the way of the spirit, and be involved with God, to let God's presence affect you personally. This is eternal life, to be in relationship with God, and to find guidance, challenge and inspiration in the way of Christ, who reveals the true nature of God.

Jack read from the first chapter of Acts this morning. This story took place after Jesus had died and was raised from the dead, and appeared to the disciples. At that point they were confused and disoriented and they asked Jesus this question: "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

The disciples still expected Jesus to establish a political kingdom on earth like the Kingdom of David, who had been the greatest king of Israel and a man of God. But instead Jesus said, "... *You* will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem... and to the ends of the earth." In other words, don't count on me to establish a kingdom on earth, like the kingdom you imagine happened in the past or you hope for in heaven. The power is coming to you now. You will have God's spirit in you. You can have eternal life in this moment, and share it with others throughout the world.

When anyone is baptized, it is a choice to live according to a different reality, God's reality, the reality of heaven or eternal life, whether you are an older child or adult choosing for yourself, or a parent choosing for a child. It's a choice to live in relationship with God, and walk in ways that may differ from the ways of the world. It's a choice to look beyond superficial cares and concerns to a deeper and higher reality. It's a choice to focus on what's important in life and not get caught up in material distractions, intellectual games, or power struggles. It's a choice to open our hearts to truth and justice, to mercy and compassion. It's a choice to risk loving our neighbors as ourselves, and to love even our enemies. It's a choice to walk in the way of Christ, in harmony with God, and to teach our children the same.

So - is infant baptism old-fashioned and superstitious? I would say it's an act of courage and strength. To choose this path is not easy. Thankfully we have a whole village to help us. We can lean on each other and help each other become all that God created us to be. And we can trust God's mercy and grace to guide and strengthen us.

God invites us to eternal life now. May we receive it gladly, live in it, teach our children, and share it with the world. To the glory of God, Amen.

* Norris, Kathleen, Amazing Grace, Riverhead Books, New York, 1998, page 367.